

COPYRIGHT



BY STEWART ALSOP

WOLF, WOLF

COPYRIGHT

WASHINGTON—Gerard C. Smith, the chief American negotiator at the SALT talks in Helsinki, is in a rather feeble bargaining position, for reasons that are hardly understood at all in this country. He is in the position of saying to his Russian interlocutors: "If you fellows will please stop what you're doing already, we'll promise not to do what we're not going to do anyway."

The history of negotiating with the Russians hardly suggests that they will warmly welcome this sort of deal. But it is really the only sort of deal Smith is in a position to offer.

On the offensive side, there are three major categories of strategic weapons. The most important, of course, is the ICBM. This country turned out its last Minuteman ICBM back in 1967. The Soviets are still churning out their various versions of the ICBM like sausages, at a rate of more than 300 a year. They now have some 1,350 operational ICBM's, about 300 more than we have. Their biggest ICBM is the SS-9, which has a warhead about twenty times as powerful as Minuteman's.

TARGET: MINUTEMAN

The Minuteman warhead, split into three independently targeted vehicles (MIRV's) could be used to wreck three cities. But the Minuteman MIRV's would not be powerful enough to dig an SS-9 or other Soviet ICBM out of its underground silo. The SS-9 warhead, similarly MIRVed, would have the kind of power (about 5 megatons) needed to knock a Minuteman out of its silo, given the accuracy attributed to the SS-9 by the intelligence specialists. The specialists have concluded that knocking out the Minuteman complex must be the purpose of the SS-9s. Since the smaller Soviet SS-11s have all the power needed to wreck any American city, what else can the SS-9s be for?

The Soviets have about 280 SS-9s operational now, and they are now believed to be building the weapons at a rate of more than 50 a year. John Foster, chief Pentagon scientist, has said that it would require about 420 MIRVed SS-9s to destroy 95 per cent of the U.S. Minuteman force.

The story is similar in the other chief categories of offensive strategic weapons—submarine-based missiles, and bombers. The United States produced its last nuclear sub in 1966, while the Soviets are turning out new nuclear

subs at the rate of about one a month. We have produced no strategic bombers in seven years, and the B-52s are getting very elderly. The Russians are testing a new, swing-wing bomber. It has a shorter range than the B-52, but with air refueling it could reach targets in this country.

On the defensive side, there is evidence—including huge new radar installations the size of several football fields—that the Soviets are greatly improving their existing, 67-missile anti-missile system. Our ABM system, which passed the Senate by a single vote, is of course strictly on paper—it will not be operational before 1974.

POSITION: FEEBLE

So what is Mr. Smith to say to the Russians? "Please stop making SS-9s, and nuclear subs, and bombers, and we won't make any either, which we have no plans for doing anyway"? Or: "Please tear down your existing ABM system, and we'll tear up our paper plans for our system"?

Gerard Smith's bargaining position is certainly not hopeless—we are still unquestionably technically superior in some areas, notably the submarine-launched missiles. But it is much feebler than most people realize. One reason its feebleness is so little understood is what might be called the "wolf-wolf syndrome."

The famous "missile gap" of the 1950s turned out not to be a gap at all, but an inflated intelligence estimate of Soviet missile production. The politicians—Sen. Stuart Symington, for example—who had taken the estimates at face value and made impassioned speeches warning of the danger to American security, were left looking a bit foolish, like the people who responded to the boy's cries of "Wolf, wolf!" in the fable. So now, in response to such facts as those given above, there has not been a peep out of Senator Symington, and hardly a peep out of anybody else.

The trouble is that this wolf is real. The intelligence is based, not on estimates, but on very detailed spy-satellite pictures. "When they build a new missile complex," said one expert at lunch at a restaurant, "we see it just as clearly as you and I can see that couple over there."

In fact, the intelligence people are beginning to worry that they may not be seeing everything quite that clearly. The Russians, who used to be surpris-

ingly naive in certain ways—notably, internal communication—are getting pretty sneaky and sophisticated.

For example, they recently fired a new missile at low altitude wholly within the U.S.S.R., from Plesetsk to the Kamchatka Peninsula, a distance of 3,500 miles. They took certain technical measures that were designed to persuade the U.S. intelligence that the missile was really a space vehicle. But intelligence specialists are now unanimous that the missile is a new prototype ICBM, a follow-on to the SS-9.

The SS-9 and the other Soviet ICBM's were test-fired over the Pacific, which made it easy to record the flight pattern, and get a very accurate "profile" of the weapon, including accuracy and warhead megatonnage. Because the new weapon was test-fired at low altitude within the U.S.S.R., its profile is fuzzy. "We had to stand on tiptoe to see it at all," says one intelligence man, "and we didn't see it very well."

MISSION: PRESERVATION

The fact that it was necessary to "stand on tiptoe" to see the new weapon is not a very good augury for the SALT talks, because any agreement will have to be based on "national means of detection"—meaning, mostly, spy satellites. But even without standing on tiptoe, the intelligence has confirmed beyond dispute that the Russians have been making really impressive strides in strategic weaponry, and nobody seems to care.

A subsidiary reason why nobody seems to care may be that the intelligence bureaucracy lacks the clout it had in the days when Allen Dulles or John McCone was an immensely powerful figure in the Washington power structure. Richard Helms, the current CIA chief, is an able intelligence officer, but he keeps strictly out of policy questions, and as the CIA has become increasingly bureaucratic, its chief mission, as with all bureaucracies, has become its own self-preservation.

But the main reason nobody seems to care is, of course, our national disease, Vietnam. Vietnam has produced such a revulsion against all things military that absolutely hard intelligence is dismissed as mere propaganda from the military-industrial complex. So the wolf growls and scratches at the door, and nobody notices. Perhaps the SALT talks will tame the wolf, but it would be unwise to count on it.